



The Challenge



October 2006

Officials speak loudly over protecting WV's youngest students

Robert Plymale, chairman of the WV Senate education committee, told Challenge WV members that “No School Building Authority money should be spent on an elementary school that is going to exceed a 30-minute bus ride.”

Speaking at the group’s annual conference in Charleston, Plymale expressed concern about the proposed closure of 121 elementary schools, some of which would create long bus rides for children as young as four.

WV has already consolidated hundreds of public schools, creating long bus rides for several thousands of students, many on school buses over one-and-one-half hour each way.

“We need to require the SBA (School Building Authority) to report each year on true travel times at all grade levels to LOCEA (Legislative Oversight Committee on Education Accountability),” he said.

Challenge WV says the state has failed to provide accurate travel times.

Linda Martin, Challenge WV coordinator, said “We are happy that Senator Plymale will champion the cause of keeping our small children in their community schools.”

The conference “Our Communities, Our Schools” focused on creating a



Panel members participate in community dialogue at Challenge’s October conference, left to right, Linda Martin, Challenge Coordinator; Sen. Robert Plymale, Senate Chair of the Education Committee; First Lady Gayle Manchin; Del. Larry Williams, Vice-Chair House Education Committee and Jay Cole, Director of Govs. Education Policy (not pictured Del. Thomas Campbell)

dialog over the future of community-based schools, also included was a discussion with first lady Gayle Manchin, House education committee chairman Del. Thomas Campbell, House education committee vice-chair Del. Larry Williams and Director of Education Policy, Jay Cole, office of the Governor.

Sen. Plymale said something could be put into legislation, that if a county chooses to exceed travel guidelines, they would have to pick up the cost of transportation.

“We should look at renovation, especially in elementary schools, whenever possible, rather than closure or consolidation,” Plymale said.

Linda Martin said Challenge’s long-time mission is to stop the harm. “We want to save the smallest children from what has already been steamroller consolidation,” she said, expressing pleasure that legislators have realized the value of community schools.

Gayle Manchin said “With a position now open on the SBA, it gives a new way to assure the SBA is not the same as it’s been in the past, with different priorities.”

Manchin says consolidated schools have less participation and a lack of unity. “Students do better when parents and community are involved,” she said, “Of great interest to the Gov. and myself is to make sure every child has the same opportunities.”

Delegate Campbell, a long-time advocate of community-based education, said “Greenbrier County has Eastern and Western Greenbrier Middle Schools. Western has 400 students and Eastern has 800-900 students.”

“Teachers tell me that Western is a
See **Officials speak loudly...** on Page 2

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Officials speak loudly over protecting WV's youngest students

continued from page 1

good model (size and enrollment) and Eastern is too large, students get 'lost' in large consolidated schools," he said, saying distance learning and technology lends to place-based education.

Jay Cole says he expects the 2007 legislative session to center on education. "The school aid formula will be a big part of that discussion," he said.

"Anecdote is not the plural of data," he said, indicating education decisions need to be made with good research and facts, "The school aid formula is complex and we need data to change it and provide an equal education."

Del. Larry Williams, an advocate of place-based education, has been a leader in the legislature to "turn the tide" against school consolidation. He was recognized for his community education efforts with a special presentation during the conference.

Responding to questions, Sen. Plymale, who was the only WV legislator to serve on the No Child Left Behind task force, said "NCLB is the race

to mediocrity, the highest level we've decided to reach is mediocre," saying it is important to give teachers the tools to enhance performance.

"We've been working on some things such as the teacher shortage in the eastern panhandle, and getting qualified math and science teachers into rural counties," Plymale said, indicating he doesn't know if he agrees with economies of scale.

Citing Cabell County, Plymale said they have created some mega schools, "I don't agree with it. I don't think it's right and I don't think SBA money should be spent on it."

He said rapidly improved technology during the past five years has helped maintain community schools, saying we need a broad-band initiative that would reach every nook and cranny in the state.

Plymale lamented that WV's assessors are not assessing at the constitutional level of 60%. "Shame on them," he said, indicating their failure to fol-

low the law impacts public education.

Martin said corporations own 51% of the land in WV and 76% of the minerals, but regular property owners pay 84% of the taxes. "The legislature, lobbied by the corporations, placed a 4% cap per year on what taxes they would have to pay.

Martin says "Schools belong to us, our communities," not an educational bureaucracy, "We know the smaller the schools, the higher the achievement."

She said citizens and taxpayers need to stand up as voice for a democratic society for the place they stand on the earth. While catchy phrases may impress people and have some purpose, "Globalized students are citizens of nowhere."

Revising the state aid formula to help rural students should be a major priority of the legislature, she said.

Martin expressed appreciation to the panel for their contribution to the discussion.

Mingo County consolidation suit is dead, some takeovers could end

The state Supreme Court has refused to intervene in a dispute over the state Board of Education's takeover of Mingo County's school system, the justices voted 4-to-1 to let stand a circuit judge's ruling that allowed the takeover.

A hearing examiner had said the plaintiffs failed to prove claims that the state board acted arbitrarily and capriciously when it seized control of the schools last year and stripped the county of its accreditation.

State Superintendent Steve Paine says the ruling confirms the state is moving in the right direction for Mingo County students.

Paine has announced that Hampshire and McDowell county school systems could be back under local control within a year, but says it's going to be longer for Mingo and Lincoln counties.



Challenge fellow Jana Freeman presents a special recognition award to Del. Larry Williams for his outstanding contribution to community-based education (Challenge Conference 2006)

Paine and the state School Board have agreed to allow Hampshire and McDowell counties to submit plans to return the systems to their local school boards instead of state control.

Paine claims both systems have



"A Community Conversation" involved fellows of Challenge WV at their annual fall conference held at Covenant House in Charleston

benefited from state control. He says Hampshire County could be back to local control in six months and McDowell County in a year.

Paine says Hampshire and McDowell county take-overs are "shining examples what can happen when

continued on page 3

Mingo County...continued from Page 2
state appointed superintendents, local boards, the state superintendent and state board of education work together.”

“I don’t think we’re ready to talk in

terms of a timeline for local control to be regained in either Lincoln or Mingo counties at this point,” both scenes of bitter consolidation battles launch by the state.

Paine continued to blame the Lin-

coln County school board for a lack of improvement in scores, although the state has run the system for six years.

Paine called the new Lincoln County High School a jewel of a project.

This 'n that around the Mountain State

BETTER SALARIES TAKE WV TEACHERS - In eastern WV counties, teachers show up one year and disappear to Virginia and other nearby states the next for better pay.

Principals have scrambled to fill teaching positions this fall. Jefferson County had 85 teaching vacancies Berkeley County had 223.

With Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania offering better pay, tuition reimbursements and signing bonuses, many West Virginia educators can’t resist.

\$5 MILLION GRANT TO GET STUDENTS TO WALK TO SCHOOL - West Virginia, a state where most students take long bus rides to reach their school, is receiving \$5 million dollars to encourage students to walk or bike instead.

In addition, as part of the West Virginia Safe Routes to School Grant Program, the state will get at least one million dollars a year for a total of at least five million dollars to encourage walking or biking to school.

Students from eleven schools in the state will participate in the program along with schools across the country.

State Department of Transportation officials say the program should cut down on fuel costs and reduce traffic congestion, in addition to getting students some exercise.

Another goal of the grant, is to facilitate the planning, development and implementation of projects that will improve safety, while reducing traffic, fuel consumption, and air pollution in the vicinity of schools.

Huh? That would be great if schools were still in nearby communities.

WV has one of the most expansive and expensive bus transportation systems in the USA, particularly since the

onset of wholesale school consolidation.

Could this be a disconnect between Washington and reality?

HARRISON BOARD SETTLES JESUS PICTURE DISPUTE - After months of controversy, the Harrison County Board of Education has agreed to settle a lawsuit that called for the removal of a painting of Jesus Christ that once hung at Bridgeport High School.

The board voted four-to-one in favor of settling the lawsuit that was filed in June.

The consent order calls for the defendants to agree not to replace the painting of Jesus with any other item with religious content. The agreement also called for civil liberties groups to waive all attorney fees.

Although members of the board who favored the picture of Christ raised over \$100,000, it apparently cannot be spend on a rather large legal bill now facing the board.

MEZZ PLEADS NOT GUILTY - Former House Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta pled not guilty to federal fraud charges in US District Court, with former Hampshire County schools Superintendent David Friend.

Both men were indicted on charges they defrauded the school board and misappropriated state grant money. They appeared before Magistrate Judge David Joel, who set a trial date of December 12th.

If convicted on both counts, each could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison and fined as much as \$500,000.

The case centers on a \$75,000 grant that Mezzatesta, a nine-term lawmaker, partially diverted to emergency services programs, including volunteer fire departments, not education.

CHARLESTON CONCERNED ABOUT DISPARITY - Charleston city councilman Harry Deitzler says he’s concerned about the number of out-of-area school transfers occurring in Kanawha County.

He says the transfers are causing a social and educational disparity within the school system.

“I think they’ve become deprived,” Deitzler said. “When you pull certain students out, programs go with them. That’s unfair to the students left behind.”

The disparity is similar to that experienced between urban communities and poor, rural communities.

“The impact is devastating to Capital High School because you’re selectively losing people, primarily those white, upper-middle class families,” Deitzler said.

STATE POLICY SOFTENS TEACHER EVALUATION - Teachers who have had good evaluations for at least five years will not be required to be re-evaluated on a regular basis, according to a new state policy.

Opponents suggest that teacher evaluations are going to be more like pop quizzes.

The state Board of Education decided to allow principals to evaluate teachers as often or as infrequently as they need to, instead of having mandatory evaluations every three years.

Board member Barbara Fish said she would like to shoot down the policy. “What we need to do is help teachers as much as possible,” she said. “And I don’t think we are doing as good a job as we think we are.”

The move is expected to lower the number of evaluations performed overall, with the policy intending to focus on new teachers.

The Challenge

The Challenge is published monthly by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide organization, committed to maintaining and improving small community schools.

Challenge West Virginia's goal is to reform education in the Mountain State so that citizens have a voice in policy decisions and every child has the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.



Challenge West Virginia

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